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CHINESE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

JAMES THAYER ADDISON

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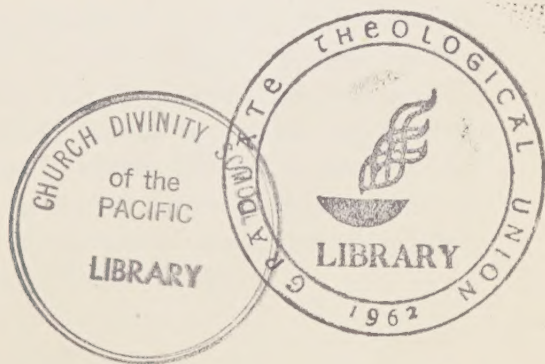
CHINESE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

A STUDY OF ITS MEANING AND ITS
RELATIONS WITH CHRISTIANITY

BY

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PREFACE


The chapter on "Modern Chinese Ancestor Worship" and part of the chapter on "Ancestor Worship and Christianity" have appeared in the *Journal of Religion* of the University of Chicago. The chapter on "The Meaning of Ancestor Worship" has appeared in the *Chinese Recorder*. Cordial thanks are due to the Editors of these journals for permission to reprint this material.

I am gratefully indebted to Bishop Roots who inspired me to undertake the study of ancestor worship, to Professor Francis C. M. Wei, Dean of the Central China University, Wuchang, for his invaluable and generous aid, to the Rev. F. L. Hawks Pott, D. D., and the Rev. John W. Nichols, D. D., for their very kind assistance in correcting the proof, and to my wife for her valued help in some of the difficulties of Chapter IV.

J. T. A.

TOKYO, JAPAN, MAY, 1925.

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IN MEMORIAM

J. H. A.

INTRODUCTION

The author of these articles on "Ancestor Worship" has visited China three times. The first was in 1909 when he served on the faculty of St. John's University for a year. The third was in 1922 when he spent a half year lecturing at Boone University, Wuchang, and St. John's University, Shanghai, and made further investigations in regard to the religions of China. His strong interest in the subject of ancestor worship has led him to devote much time to its study.

Of course there is a large amount of literature on this subject and it has been much discussed. The ordinary reader, however, has not the time to go to all the sources and spend the time requisite to get a comprehensive view. The author has accomplished the very useful work of gathering together the important facts and views in regard to this mooted question and thus has accomplished a most useful piece of work.

As has often been said, caste in India and ancestor worship in China have stood out as two almost impregnable fortresses to the missionary work of the Christian church, and a hot debate has been waged over the question as to whether ancestor worship was or was not idolatrous.

The introduction of Western thought brings with it the development of individualism and individual rights and this has caused a reaction against the idea of clan and family solidarity. The West has perhaps gone to

one extreme and the East to another, and a synthesis of the two ideas would seem to be necessary.

Even if the question of ancestor worship does not loom as largely in the minds of Christian missionaries as formerly, yet we know that the belief is deep-rooted in China, and that we cannot understand the religion of this country without a thorough study of this very ancient religious cult.

F. L. HAWKS POTT.

SHANGHAI,

MARCH 27, 1925.

CHAPTER I
CLASSICAL ANCESTOR WORSHIP

CHINESE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

CHAPTER I

CLASSICAL ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Ancestor worship appears in the earliest Chinese classics as a cultus already well established and presumably ancient. "The Books of Yü" in the "Shu King" record the events of a time about twenty-two hundred years before Christ, though their date of composition is probably early in the first millennium before Christ. In these documents we read of the sovereign's ancestral temple¹ and of the presence of the dead at sacrifices.² In the books of the Shang (or Yin) dynasty (1766-1122) there are recorded the practice of royal ancestor worship and the custom of presenting the heir to the throne before the shrine of his deceased grandfather.³ The continued activity of the dead and their interest in the conduct of their descendants appears in such a passage as that in which the King Pan-kang (who reigned about 1400 B. C.) addresses a group of his people: "Now when I offer the great sacrifices to my predecessors, your forefathers are present to share in them. [They all observe] the happiness I confer and the sufferings I inflict."⁴ A more striking

¹ "Shu King," Pt. II, Bk. I, Chs. 2-4; Bk. II, Ch. 2. References and quotations are derived from Legge's translations of "The Five Classics" and "The Four Books." The text of the former is that contained in "The Sacred Books of the East," edited by Max Müller.

² *Id.*, Pt. II, Bk. IV, Ch. 2.

³ *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. IV, Ch. 1; Bk. V, § 1, Ch. 1; § 2, Ch. 3.

⁴ *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. VII, § 1, Ch. 2.

instance of the concern of the deceased for the behavior of the living and their response to good or evil conduct may be found later in the same speech, where the king, in persuading the people that Heaven desires the capital to be moved, says: "Were I to err in my government and remain long here, my high sovereign [the founder of our dynasty], would send down on me great punishment for my crime, and say, 'Why do you oppress my people?' . . . You are the people whom I [wish to] cherish. But your conduct is injurious;—it is cherished in your hearts. Whereas my royal predecessors made your ancestors and fathers happy, they, your ancestors and fathers, will now cut you off and abandon you, and not save you from death. . . . They advise my high sovereign to send down great calamities.¹

In view of the interest manifested by ancestors in the affairs of their descendants it is not surprising that communication should have been held with ancestors by means of divination. An example of this practice appears in one of the books of the Chou dynasty, which records the serious illness of King Wu. His brother builds altars to the three immediate ancestors and implores them to let him die in place of the king. To learn their decision he thereupon consults the tortoise shell (then used as a divining instrument) and learns that Wu will recover.²

¹ "Shu King," Pt. IV, Bk. VII, § 2, Ch. 2.

² *Id.*, Pt. V, Bk. VI, Ch. 1.

As to the forms used in the royal cult of ancestors, only slight indications appear in the "Shu King." That offerings of food and drink were made to them by the reigning king on stated occasions and with prescribed ceremonies is indicated by such passages as these: "On the day [called] Ting-wei, he [the King] sacrificed in the ancestral temple of Chou, when [the princes] of the royal domain, and of the Tien, Hou, and Wei domains, all hurried about, carrying the dishes."¹ "Thrice he [the King] slowly and reverently advanced with a cup of spirits; . . . thrice he sacrificed [to the spirit of his father]: and thrice he put the cup down. The Minister of Religion said, 'It is accepted.'"² At this period of Chinese history it was the custom to have "personators" of the dead. Certain specially appointed members of the family impersonated the dead by receiving homage on their behalf and partaking of the offerings. An extreme degree of dignity was required of them; they must remain as nearly as possible without motion or expression—mere figureheads. Hence they are familiarly referred to in several passages as a type of lifeless sham. Hsi and Ho, two unobservant ministers of the Board of Astronomy, "as if they were [mere] personators of the dead in their offices, heard nothing and knew nothing."³ And again, "Thai K'ang occupied the throne like a personator of the dead";⁴ i. e., as Legge says, he was no better than a sham sovereign.

¹ "Shu King," Pt. V, Bk. III, Ch. 1.

² *Id.*, Pt. V, Bk. XXII, Ch. 2.

³ *Id.*, Pt. III, Bk. IV, Ch. 2.

⁴ *Id.*, Pt. III, Bk. III, Ch. 1.

The "Shih King," or "The Book of Odes," includes material ranging in age from about 1700 to 600 B.C. Many of the odes were composed especially for use in royal ancestor worship and many others contain references to the rites. They tell us much the same story as the "Book of History": but the information they afford both as to the form and as to the meaning of the cult is somewhat more detailed.

The elaborate ceremonies, conducted after due purification and with "careful and exact . . . deportment,"¹ include the use of dancing and of music — drums, flutes, bells, etc.² The food presented to the ancestors is frequently noted — clear spirits and soups,³ fish⁴ and meat. For meat a ram and a bull were often sacrificed;⁵ but the choicest offering of all was that of a red bull.⁶ Acting on behalf of the deceased, the personators were seated and invited to partake, and at the close were escorted out with music.⁷ Afterwards the relatives of the deceased ate and drank to the full.⁸ The four great occasions in each year for this cult of ancestors were on appointed days in spring, summer, autumn, and winter.⁹ So many

¹ "Shih King," Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. I, Ode IX; Pt. II, Bk. I, Ode VI.

² *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. III, Ode I, and Legge's notes.

³ *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. III, Ode II.

⁴ *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. II, Ode VI.

⁵ *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. I, Ode VII; Pt. II, Bk. VI, Ode V.

⁶ *Id.*, Pt. II, Bk. VI, Ode VI; Pt. III, Bk. I, Ode V.

⁷ *Id.*, Pt. II, Bk. VI, Ode V.

⁸ *Id.*, Pt. II, Bk. VI, Ode V; Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. I, Ode IX.

⁹ *Id.*, Pt. II, Bk. I, Ode VI. Besides the regular sacrifices, "announcements" were made by the king to his ancestors, or to some particular ancestor, upon the occasion of an important royal act.

Vide Id., Pt. III, Bk. III, Ode VIII.

of these details are included in one well-known ode, that we cite it here in full:

“Thick grew the tribulus [on the ground],
 But they cleared away its thorny bushes.
 Why did they this of old?
 That we might plant our millet and sacrificial millet;
 That our millet might be abundant,
 And our sacrificial millet luxuriant.
 When our barns are full,
 And our stacks can be counted by tens of myriads,
 We proceed to make spirits and prepared grain,
 For offerings and sacrifice.
 We seat the representatives of the dead, and urge them to
 eat:—
 Thus seeking to increase our bright happiness.

“With correct and reverent deportment,
 The bulls and rams all pure,
 We proceed to the winter and autumnal sacrifices.
 Some flay [the victims]; some cook [their flesh];
 Some arrange [the meat]; some adjust [the pieces of it].
 The officer of prayer sacrifices inside the temple gate,
 And all the sacrificial service is complete and brilliant.
 Grandly come our progenitors;
 Their spirits happily enjoy the offerings;
 Their filial descendant receives blessing:—
 They will reward him with great happiness,
 With myriads of years, life without end.

“They attend to the furnaces with reverence;
 They prepare the trays, which are very large:—
 Some for the roast meat, some for the broiled.
 Wives presiding are still and reverent,
 Preparing the numerous [smaller] dishes.

The guests and visitors
 Present the cup all round.
 Every form is according to rule;
 Every smile and word are as they should be.
 The spirits quickly come,
 And respond with great blessings,—
 Myriads of years as the [fitting] reward.

“We are very much exhausted,
 And have performed every ceremony without error.
 The able officer of prayer announces [the will of the spirits],
 And goes to the filial descendant to convey it:
 ‘Fragrant has been your filial sacrifice,
 And the spirits have enjoyed your spirits and viands.
 They confer on you a hundred blessings;
 Each as it is desired,
 Each as sure as law.
 You have been exact and expeditious;
 You have been correct and careful;
 They will ever confer on you the choicest favours,
 In myriads and tens of myriads.’

“The ceremonies having been thus completed,
 And the bells and drums having given their warning,
 The filial descendant goes to his place,
 And the able officer of prayer makes his announcement,
 ‘The spirits have drunk to the full.’
 The great representatives of the dead then rise,
 And the bells and drums escort their withdrawal,
 [On which] the spirits tranquilly return [to whence they
 came].
 All the servants, and the presiding wives,
 Remove [the trays and dishes] without delay,
 The [sacrificer’s] uncles and cousins
 All repair to the private feast.

The musicians all go in to perform,
 And give their soothing aid at the second blessing.
 Your viands are set forth;
 There is no dissatisfaction, but all feel happy.
 They drink to the full and eat to the full;
 Great and small, they bow their heads, [saying,]
 'The spirits enjoyed your spirits and viands,
 And will cause you to live long.
 Your sacrifices, all in their seasons,
 Are completely discharged by you.
 May your sons and your grandsons
 Never fail to perpetuate these services!'"¹

This ode not only summarizes the ritual upon which we have already commented but indicates also the significance of the sacrifice. We learn here and elsewhere that the ancestors, outwardly represented by the personators, are truly present in spirit and enjoy the offerings.² Responding to the filial piety of their descendants, they are said to bestow long life, prosperity, and happiness without limit.³

The problem of the meaning and motive of classical ancestor worship cannot, of course, be solved by casual reference to certain passages. If the solution were as easy as that the question would not have been under debate for the past three centuries. Yet several facts are clear from the beginning and can hardly be disputed.

¹ "Shih King," Pt. II, Bk. VI, Ode V.

² Cf. *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. III, Ode II; Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. I, Ode VII.

³ Cf. *Id.*, Pt. IV, Bk. III, Ode II; Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. I, Ode IX; Dec. II, Odes VI, VII, and VIII; Pt. IV, Bk. II, Ode IV.

The dead are undoubtedly regarded as actually present at the sacrificial feasts and able to enjoy them. The rites are thus based upon a genuine objective reality. And it is equally plain that the sacrifices are regarded as a supremely important duty, the neglect of which results in misfortune and the observance of which brings happiness. Beyond these points it is difficult to go without entering the field of controversy. Within that field the two crucial questions are (a) With what purpose are the sacrifices to ancestors performed? and (b) Are the ancestors themselves supposed to send rewards and punishments directly? In other words, how seriously is the worshiper influenced by the expectation of a definite *quid pro quo*? How far are the ancestors treated like gods?

Judging from the "Shu King" and "Shih King" alone, we infer that the main purpose of the sacrificer is to honor his ancestors by the performance of a duty prompted by filial piety¹ and sanctioned by the tradition of centuries. Back of the ceremonies lies a feeling that the ancestors need or demand the offerings and that the living are under heavy obligation to present them. The very fact that the cult of ancestors is regarded as an example of filial piety indicates that its rites were regarded as performed primarily for the benefit of the ancestors. Another inference easily made but less easily defended is

¹ "In worshipping your ancestors, think how you can prove your filial piety," "Shu King," Pt. IV. Bk. V, § 2, Ch. 3.

that definite ancestors deliberately reward or punish specific instances of tendance or neglect. Such, at least, is the most obvious meaning of numerous passages already cited. "Your ancestors will now abandon you and not save you from death," "Permanent are the blessings coming from our meritorious ancestor," "He will bless us with the eyebrows of longevity," "O great Father, condescend to preserve and enlighten me," "The spirits confer on you a hundred blessings" — lines like these seem to indicate that ancestors themselves are able to bless or injure their descendants. But while this may well have been a popular belief (as it has remained to this day) it is unlikely that it represents the true classical theory. We are easily misled if we isolate these passages from their literary and religious context; we can rightly interpret them only within their total setting.

The controlling religious conception of "The Book of History" and "The Book of Odes" is the supremacy of Heaven. Tien or Shang Ti (Supreme Ruler) originated and sustains both the natural and the moral order of the universe. All-wise and all-powerful in his providential activity, he remains the guardian of that moral order. Nothing is more plainly fundamental in classical thinking than this belief that Nature operates according to law and that man's duty is to be in harmony with that law. The law itself (the Tao, or Way) is decreed and executed by Heaven.

It is only when we have this enveloping idea clear in mind that we can give a reliable account of the

activity attributed to ancestors. From many classical sayings it looks as if each ancestor were an independent little god dealing out favors and penalties with an eye to the sort of treatment he has received. This conception, however, is probably un-Chinese and certainly unclassical. No man, even though a king, and no king, even though deceased, has any power to tamper with the moral laws of the universe ordained by Heaven. Thanks to this overruling providence, blessings inevitably attend the virtuous, especially those who display filial piety, and disaster inevitably overtakes the unworthy, especially those who neglect their filial duties. Whatever power to reward or punish may be attributed to ancestors must therefore be secondary, for it can be operative only within the limits of the Tao of Heaven. The maximum of power which (according to the classical theory) can properly be ascribed to ancestors is to espouse the cause of their descendants or to execute upon them, for good or ill, the decrees of Shang Ti. Ancestors may perhaps watch over their descendants and champion their interests before Shang Ti; but they cannot change the moral law of cause and effect. In other words, the rewards and punishments that follow tendance or neglect are not due to ancestral feelings of pleasure or irritation, but to the fact that the world is so ordered by Heaven that the dutiful prosper and the undutiful suffer.

This interpretation of classical doctrine may seem hard to justify in the face of much evidence supplied by

the "History" and especially by the "Odes"; but its acceptance becomes easier in the light of the following considerations. In the first place, the "Shu King" and the "Shih King" represent an official organization and codification of current beliefs and practices undertaken for purposes of state. They provide us with an expurgation or revision rather than a reflection of the religion of the time. They are the result of conscious reformation from above, carried out, during a long period, with the aim to make the ritual of official religion more dignified and uniform. We may reasonably expect, therefore, to find interpretations of religious and political beliefs above the average level of the period. Furthermore, the classics, from their very nature, are almost entirely concerned with the religion of the court, and the ancestor worship which they describe is royal. Hence, the language used in addressing ancestors and the powers ascribed to the deceased are appropriate to kings. The king, in his lifetime, was the Son of Heaven, with power of life and death over his subjects. Since his rank in the next world is certainly not diminished and his special relationship to Shang Ti is presumably maintained, we may naturally expect greater powers to be assigned to him than to any ordinary ancestor as such. If his power to influence the fortunes of his descendants seems almost divine, it is due to his divinity as a monarch and not as an ancestor. He is still a vicegerent of Heaven, through whom Heaven can speak and act.

Again, it is necessary to use caution in drawing logical conclusions from the language of Oriental poets. A court poet addressing a departed sovereign cannot be taken too literally if he is to furnish data for the history of religion. The attributes assigned to royal ancestors in the "Odes" and the language in which their powers are described are partly the result of the singer's poetry and partly of his flattery. But in spite of the tendency of the courtier and the poet to overemphasize the divine prerogatives of the deceased monarch, it is noteworthy that many of the odes prophesy blessings upon the sacrificer without any mention of an agent or giver.¹ Indeed, in several odes the translation by Legge inserts the idea of ancestors as givers in passages where the Chinese text makes no reference to the source of the gifts.²

If we pay due regard, then, to the character and purpose of "The Book of History" and "The Book of Odes" and to the style of the documents they contain, we are justified in saying that the *classical interpretation* of the ancient and popular cult of ancestors magnifies the importance of the rites as a manifestation of filial piety certain to bring rich rewards but minimizes their religious aspect as a means of obtaining goods from higher powers. This classical emphasis is still more marked in the last

¹ "Shih King," Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. I, Ode IX; Dec. II, Odes VI and VIII.

² E. g., Pt. II, Bk. VI, Odes V and VI; Pt. IV, Bk. II, Ode IV.

of the Five Classics to be canonized — the “Li Ki,” or “The Book of Rites.”¹

Since the “Li Ki” is concerned with the subject of rites and ceremonies and since ancestor worship was the most universally important of all ceremonies, a large part of this classic is devoted to the explanation of its forms and their significance. As in the other classics, chief consideration is given to royal ancestor worship.

The worship of the family ancestors, however, is an obligation prescribed for all classes of society from the king to the common man. Indeed, it is the only form of worship required of the lower officers of government.² The importance attached to ancestor worship may be inferred not only from its universality but also from the sanctity attaching to the ancestral temple. “When a superior man, [high in rank,] is about to engage in building, the ancestral temple should have his first attention, the stables and arsenal the next, and the residences the last.”³ Confucius is quoted as naming “the grand ancestral temple taking fire” as one among several major catastrophes (such as an eclipse or the death of the king) which would justify breaking off the rites of audience or of sacrifice.⁴ This sacredness of the ancestral temple was

¹ The “Yih King” (or “The Book of Changes”), being a manual of divination, contains little or nothing of value for a study of ancestor worship.

² “Li Ki,” Bk. I, § II, Pt. III, 4.

³ *Id.*, Bk. I, § II, Pt. I, 9. Cf. “Shih King,” Pt. III, Bk. I, Ode III, and Legge’s note, *S. B. E.*, Vol. III, p. 384.

⁴ *Id.*, Bk. V, § II, 1-3.

emphasized by an elaborate ceremony of consecration, during which the blood of the victim was poured not only upon the temple itself, but also upon all the more important sacrificial vessels.¹ Only the king, nobles, and higher officers, however, possessed ancestral temples. The lower officers and the common people presented their sacrifices at a shrine placed in some room of the house.²

Of fundamental importance in the performance of the rites were the personators and the tablets, both of which were used to represent the ancestors. The general character of personators has already been explained by reference to the earlier classics. But the "Li Ki" gives fuller details as to their selection and behavior.

The son of the sacrificer was normally chosen to impersonate the deceased father of the sacrificer—i. e., "a grandson acted as the representative of his grandfather."³ If there was no grandson, some one of the same surname acted in his place.⁴ Seated in impassive dignity, he received the libations and the offerings of food. After the personator had drunk several cups, the cup was then passed to the others present in order of rank.⁵ At the

¹ "Li Ki," Bk. XVIII, §II, Pt. II, 33.

² *Id.*, Bk. XX, 5. It was only the king who enjoyed the services of a "grand-minister of the ancestral temple." *Vide* "Li Ki," Bk. I, §II, Pt. II, 2. Cf. references to a similar official in "Shu King," Pt. V, Bk. XX, Ch. III; Pt. II, Bk. I, Ch. V.

³ "Li Ki," Bk. XXII, 16; Bk. I, §I, Pt. IV, 4.

⁴ *Id.*, Bk. V, §II, 20.

⁵ *Id.*, Bk. XXII, 17.

close of the sacrifice he pronounced a blessing upon those present, speaking through the officer of prayer who was "the medium of communication between him and the sacrificer."¹ "The blessing [pronounced by him] was for long continuance, and comprehensive."² It is clear, as the "Li Ki" explains, that "the presence [of the representative] was that the spirit might enjoy [the offerings]. . . . The personator [seemed] to display [the departed]."² Though the presentation of the libation was the central point of the sacrifice,³ it was accompanied, at least at court, by other and more elaborate ceremonies, which included music, dancing, and the subsequent feasting of personators.⁴ In essence, however, "the ancestral sacrifices were family feasts for the living and the dead."⁵

But the dead were not only represented by the personators. They were also regarded as present in the ancestral tablets, which were kept enshrined and displayed at the time of sacrifice.⁶ Before the burial of the dead, a temporary tablet was set up over the coffin.⁷ After the interment came the "sacrifice of repose." The temporary tablet was then buried or burned and a permanent tablet set up in the ancestral temple. "At

¹ "Li Ki," Bk. IX, § III, 26.

² *Id.*, Bk. IX, § III, 19.

³ *Id.*, Bk. XXII, 9.

⁴ *Id.*, Bk. XXII, 9, 10; Bk. XXI, § I, 8. For further ritual details, see "Li Ki," Bks. XXI and XXII, and "Shih King," Pt. II, Bk. VI, Ode V, quoted above.

⁵ G. F. Moore, "History of Religions," Vol. I, p. 15 f.

⁶ Cf. Legge's note, *S. B. E.*, Vol. XXVII, p. 224 f.

⁷ "Li Ki," Bk. XVIII, § I, Pt. II, 18.

midday the sacrifice of repose is offered . . . on the day of interment; they cannot bear that the departed should be left a single day [without a place to rest in]. . . . The next day the service of placing the spirit tablet of the departed next to that of his grandfather was performed.”¹ “The spirit tablet was a rectangular piece of wood, in the case of a king, a cubit and two inches long.”² These tablets were housed according to the following scheme: “[The Ancestral temple of] the Son of Heaven embraced seven fanes [or smaller temples]; three on the left and three on the right, and that of his great ancestor. . . . [The temple of] the prince in a state embraced five such fanes: those of two on the left and two on the right, and that of his great ancestor. . . . Great officers had three fanes:—one on the left, one on the right, and that of his great ancestor. . . . Other officers had [only] one. The common people presented their offerings in their [principal] apartment.”³ The seven shrines of the king were those in which reposed the soul tablets of the “grand ancestor,” to whom his family line was ultimately traced, the kings Wan and Wu, founders of his dynasty (the Chou), and his great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, grandfather, and father. The shrines of lesser dignitaries are simply an abbreviation of this scheme. When a king died, the

¹ “Li Ki,” Bk. II, § II, Pt. I, 26, 36-38. Cf. Legge’s notes, *S. B. E.*, Vol. XXVII, pp. 168, 171, and XXVIII, p. 48.

² *S. B. E.*, Vol. XXVII, p. 108, note.

³ “Li Ki,” Bk. III, § III, 4

tablets of his four immediate predecessors were moved up one place, his own inserted in the lowest shrine and that of his great-great-grandfather placed in an apartment which served as a depository for the tablets of remoter ancestors.¹ The tablets of wives were set beside those of their husbands in their shrines, so that both shared in the honors of the service.² As one of the "Odes" says, "I offer this sacrifice to my meritorious father, and to my accomplished mother."³ That there were female as well as male personators seems evident from a passage in the "Li Ki" referring to a wife as impersonating the deceased grandmother of her husband.⁴

The tablets were not always left undisturbed in their royal shrines, for the custom prevailed at times during the Chou dynasty of removing them when a martial expedition was in progress in order that they might accompany the army of the king.⁵ On these occasions the tablets were guarded with great care by the royal family in order to show their "deep sense of filial piety and love."⁶

The sacrifices to ancestors were normally offered by the eldest son of the proper or leading wife. Only in his absence might the son of a secondary wife officiate. Even then, according to a statement attributed to Confucius,

¹ *S. B. E.*, Vol. XXVII, p. 224 f., note.

² *Id.*, Vol. III, p. 326, note.

³ "Shih King," Pt. IV, Bk. I, Dec. II, Ode VII.

⁴ "Li Ki," Bk. XV, 26.

⁵ *Id.*, Bk. V, § I, 24.

⁶ *Id.*, Bk. VI, § II, 6, 13.

he must sacrifice at the grave and not in the house.¹ The number of ancestors to whom the eldest son offered sacrifice seems to have depended upon the rank of the officiant, a regulation indicated by the arrangement of the shrines for different ranks. "Only the king offered the united sacrifice to all ancestors. . . . The sacrifices of the princes of states reached to their highest ancestor. Great officers . . . were able to carry their sacrifices up to their high ancestors."² We may infer from the "Li Ki" as well as from the practice of future ages that lesser folk confined themselves to the tendance of father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.³

The regular times for ancestor worship were at fixed dates at the four seasons of the year.⁴ But the rites were performed at many other times, such as at the end of the first year of mourning and of the second year of mourning.⁵ The king was expected to sacrifice every month to his four immediate ancestors and his high ancestor.⁶ In addition to seasonal and monthly sacrifices, offerings were presented whenever "announcements" were made to the ancestors. These took place on occasions of importance when the filial descendant felt it his duty to keep his forefathers in touch with events of importance

¹ "Li Ki," Bk. V, § II, 19.

² *Id.*, Bk. XIV, 1.

³ The king is also said to have sacrificed to descendants of former kings who had died prematurely. *Vide* "Li Ki," Bk. XX, 8.

⁴ "Li Ki," Bk. III, § III, 5; Bk. XXII, 24.

⁵ *Id.*, Bk. XIII, § II, 29.

⁶ *Id.*, Bk. XX, 5.

in the family or the state. The birth of a son and heir, for instance, is always announced.¹ A bride "after three months . . . presents herself in the ancestral temple, and is styled 'the new wife that has come.' A day is chosen for her to sacrifice at the shrine of her father-in-law; expressing the idea of her being[now] the established wife."² Certain other ceremonies, while not mentioned as occasions of sacrifice, took place in the ancestral temple and may therefore be classified as "announcements." The "capping" ceremony, by which a youth attained his majority, was considered important. "Considering it so important, they performed it in the ancestral temple. . . . Not daring themselves to take the responsibility of it, they therefore humbled themselves, and gave honor in doing so to their forefathers."³ Similarly, the preliminaries of marriage proposals, receiving of gifts, fixing of the day, etc., were all "received by the principal party [on the lady's side], as he rested on his mat . . . in the ancestral temple."⁴ When the feudal princes visited each other or went to the royal court they made announcement, with sacrifice, of their departure and their return.⁵ When the king set forth upon a journey or a military expedition he made similar announcements, and repeated them upon his return.⁶

¹ "Li Ki," Bk. V, § I, 3.

² *Id.*, Bk. V, § I, 20.

³ *Id.*, Bk. XL, 6.

⁴ *Id.*, Bk. XLI, 1.

⁵ *Id.*, Bk. V, § I, 4.

⁶ *Id.*, Bk. III, § II, 21; Bk. V, § I, 25.

The few references to ancestor worship which may be found in the "Hsiao King" (or "The Classic of Filial Piety") and in "The Four Books"¹ serve merely to repeat or to confirm the facts already set forth. We read of the ancestral temple, and the tablet,² the personator,³ and the seasonal sacrifices.⁴ The extent of ancestor worship is indicated by the statement in "The Doctrine of the Mean" that King Wu, who sacrificed to ancestors, 'extended this rule to the princes of the empire, the great officers, the scholars, and the common people.'⁵

The conclusions regarding the motive and meaning of classical ancestor worship which have already been suggested by a study of the "Shu King" and the "Shih King" are fortified by an examination of the "Li Ki" and "The Four Books." All of the documents in the latter and many of those in the former represent a stratum of literature later than the "History" and the "Odes." Their later date and their didactic purpose explain their more self-conscious attitude towards the meaning of the ancestral rites. In studying them we do not depend wholly on inference, for we are aided by the fact that the writers sometimes state explicitly the significance of the ceremonies they describe.

¹ "The Analects of Confucius," "The Doctrine of the Mean," "The Great Learning," and "Mencius."

² "Hsiao King," Ch. XVIII.

³ "Mencius," Bk. VI, Pt. I, Ch. V.

⁴ "Hsiao King," Ch. XVIII; "The Doctrine of the Mean," Ch. XIX, 3.

⁵ "The Doctrine of the Mean," Ch. XVIII, 3.

It is generally assumed as a matter of course that the ancestors are present at the sacrifices and enjoy the offerings. "When in the ancestral temple he [the Son of Heaven] exhibits the utmost reverence, the spirits of the departed manifest themselves."¹ "When sacrificed to, their disembodied spirits enjoyed their offerings."² "The object of all the ceremonies is to bring down the spirits from above." All was "done to please the souls of the departed."³ Yet what may be a shade of skepticism occasionally darkens the comment, as in the famous account of Confucius which says, "He sacrificed [to the dead] as if they were present."⁴ The "as if," of course, may or may not indicate a doubt of the reality.

But the presence of the ancestors and their enjoyment of the feasts are facts from which various conclusions might have been drawn as to the meaning of the rites. The teaching set forth in the Confucian Books and especially in the "Li Ki" is uniformly in favor of interpreting the ceremonies as memorials or as rites of tendance rather than as strictly religious worship. Their object is not to obtain temporal blessings for the living, but to serve and to commemorate the departed. A direct statement of this doctrine may be found in the "Li Ki." After asserting the need for sincerity and virtue in the sacrificer, the writer adds that "the sacrifices of such men have their

¹ "Hsiao King," Ch. XVI.

² *Id.*, Ch. VIII.

³ "Li Ki," Bk. VII, § I, 11; cf. Bk. XXI, § I, 6.

⁴ "Analects," Bk. III, Ch. XII.

own blessing;—not indeed what the world calls blessing [i. e., not success or long life]. . . . Thus intelligently does he offer his sacrifices, *without seeking for anything to be gained by them*:—such is the heart and mind of a filial son.”¹ Though we may infer that such disinterested sacrifice was not universal and perhaps not even customary, we can at least conclude that it represented the standard set by the best classical tradition.

That tradition lays emphasis upon both tendance and commemoration as evidence of filial piety. Recording with admiration the deeds of King Wu and the Duke of Chou, the writer of “The Doctrine of the Mean” says, “Thus they served the dead as they would have served them alive; they served the departed as they would have served them had they been continued among them.”² And the “Li Ki” states that “King Wan in sacrificing, served the dead as if he were serving the living.”³ This conception of the ancestral rites as simply constituting a continuance of the respect and service due to parents during their lifetime must have been in the mind of Confucius when he defined filial piety as meaning “that parents, when alive, should be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety.”⁴ Or, as the “Li Ki”

1 “Li Ki,” Bk. XXII, 2.

2 “The Doctrine of the Mean,” Ch. XIX, 5.

3 “Li Ki,” Bk. XXI, § I, 7.

4 “Analects,” Bk. II, Ch. V, 3.

puts it: "Therefore in three ways is a filial son's service of his parents shown:—while they are alive, by nourishing them; when they are dead, by all the rites of mourning; and when the mourning is over by sacrificing to them; . . . in his sacrifices we see his reverence and observance of the [proper] seasons."¹ The practice of "announcements," for instance, is clearly a continuance of the relations of respect and obedience customary between living parents and children. "A son, when he is going abroad, must inform [his parents where he is going]; when he returns, he must present himself before them."² Indeed, the persistence of the sentiments of reverence and affection and the desire for continued intercourse with the dead are quite sufficient, according to the classics, to account for the rites of ancestor worship. "The sacrificer simply showed his reverence to the utmost of his power."³ "From the affection for parents came the honoring of ancestors."⁴ A filial son "seeks to have communion with the dead in their spiritual state."⁵ The offerings "constitute a union [of the living] with the disembodied and unseen."⁶

In other passages it is the memorial element of the rites upon which special stress is laid. In one chapter of the "Li Ki," largely devoted to "The Meaning of

¹ "Li Ki," Bk. XXII, 3.

² *Id.*, Bk. I, § I, Pt. II, 4.

³ *Id.*, Bk. IX, § III, 25.

⁴ *Id.*, Bk. XIV, 19.

⁵ *Id.*, Bk. XXI, § I, 9.

⁶ *Id.*, Bk. VII, § I, 11.

Sacrifices," it is said that filial piety requires of a son that he should retain the memory of his parents and of their aims, likings, and wishes. Sacrificing, we are told, "means directing one's self to. The son directs his thoughts [to his parents], and then he can offer his sacrifice."¹

The social and political value of ancestor worship is explained in these words — "The object of all the ceremonies is . . . [also] to rectify the relations between ruler and ministers; to maintain the generous feeling between father and son, and the harmony between elder and younger brother; to adjust the relations between high and low; and to give their proper places to husband and wife."² In other words, as we should put it to-day (and as many modern students of China have observed), ancestor worship makes for the stability of the state and the moral welfare of society.³

¹ "Li Ki," Bk. XXI, § I, 6.

² *Id.*, Bk. VII, § 1, 10.

³ How imperfect are the classics as reflections of popular religious belief and how much in the religious life of the masses finds no place in their austere edited pages is a fact of which we cannot too often remind ourselves. Note, for instance, the writings of Wang Chung, the brilliant anti-Confucian heretic of the first century. He denies the continued existence of the dead in the form of disembodied spirits and argues that they cannot injure anybody. From his spirited attack upon what he regarded as the superstitions of his age it is quite clear that for many the main motive for the ancestral sacrifices was to secure blessings and to avert disaster.

Cf. H. A. Giles: "Confucianism and Its Rivals," N. Y., 1915, pp. 160 ff.

Jas. Jackson in "Report of Missionary Conference at Shanghai," 1907, p. 221.

CHAPTER II

MODERN ANCESTOR WORSHIP

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Ancestor worship is still the most vital factor in the religion of China. Except among the converts to Christianity and Mohammedanism, it continues to hold a position of supreme consequence in the religious and social life of the people. It has been described as "the essential religion of China,"¹ "the keystone to the arch of China's social structure,"² and "the most deeply rooted of all forms of religion in the very fiber of the Chinese character."³ Without raising at present the question of how far the cult of ancestors is entirely religious, we may recognize the unanimous testimony to its universal vitality and its unrivaled importance in the national life.

The rites remain essentially the same as in Confucian times. Yet the changes that have come to pass in the course of centuries and the much more ample evidence now available concerning every aspect of the cultus justify a full description of the outward forms before we proceed to discuss their inner meaning.

One picturesque feature of the classical rites has practically disappeared. The "personator," so prominent during the Chou period, went completely out of fashion

¹ W. E. Soothill, "The Three Religions of China," N. Y., 1913, p. 213.

² E. Bard, "Chinese Life in Town and Country" (transl.), N. Y., 1905, p. 39.

³ C. Holcombe, "The Real Chinaman," N. Y., 1895, p. 123.

at the close of that dynasty in the third century before Christ,¹ and since that time has seldom reappeared. In certain parts of China, however, such as the neighborhood of Canton, personators are still employed at the spring and autumn sacrifices.

The ancestral tablets, however, possess as great significance as ever. Their shape and size vary in different parts of the country. The tablets range in height from eight to eighteen inches and in width from two to four inches. The normal type, made of carved wood, is composed of three pieces—a square pedestal and two oblong upright pieces of unequal length. The longer piece, which terminates in a round knob, is set into the rear of the pedestal and the slightly shorter piece is slipped in front of the former, fitting into it so closely that the tablet appears to be of but one piece. On the outer surface of the first piece are inscribed or engraved the name and year of the reigning dynasty, the title of the deceased, his personal name and surname, and the name of the son who erects the tablet. On the inner surface (or front of the rear piece) are recorded the day and hour of birth and death and the place of burial. There is usually no inscription on the back of the tablet. These items of information are not distributed upon the parts of the tablet in a uniform manner; but most of the facts cited appear on one or the other of the two parts. In

¹ W. Grube, "Religion und Kultus der Chinesen," Leipzig, 1910, p. 44 f.

P. W. Pitcher, "In and About Amoy," Shanghai, 1909, p. 65.

certain parts of China, as at Wuchang, the tablet is sometimes a single ornate piece of wood inscribed on front and rear and set upon a pedestal representing the gateway of a shrine. Local variation also occurs in the form of the mother's tablet. Sometimes the wife of the deceased has a separate tablet; at other times she shares a tablet with her husband.

A typical inscription on the front of the tablet reads, "The tablet of Mr. Hwang Yung-fah, . . . the head of the family, who finished his probation with honor during the Imperial Ts'ing Dynasty, reaching a sub-magistracy." A familiar method of introducing the name of the son is as follows: "The spirit tablet of my deceased honored father and mother. I their son N. N. reverentially make obeisance and offer sacrifice."¹

Even more varied than the methods of making the tablet are the practices which precede its permanent installation in the family shrine. Omitting many minor differences, we may note, however, certain common or typical customs. In some parts of the country there are

¹ Vide H. Doré, "Researches into Chinese Superstitions" (transl.), Shanghai, 1914, Vol. I, pp. 104, 107 f.

J. Doolittle, "Social Life of the Chinese," N. Y., 1865, Vol. I, pp. 219 ff.

P. W. Pitcher, *op. cit.*, p. 66 f.

R. F. Johnston, "Lion and Dragon in Northern China," London, 1910, p. 278 f.

Chinese Repository, Canton, 1849, Vol. XVIII, p. 381 f.

Schultze, "Totenverehrung in China," in *Evangelisches Missionsmagazin*, Basel, Jan., 1887, p. 29.

Nitschkowsky, "Der chinesische Ahnenkultus," in *Allgemeine Missions-Zeitschrift*, 1895, Vol. XXII, p. 366.

References cited frequently refer to the preceding paragraph, and not merely to the preceding sentence. *

two tablets — a temporary tablet usually of paper and a permanent tablet of wood. The former is buried with the body or burned at the grave; the latter is subsequently installed in the ancestral hall. For the purposes of true ancestor worship only the latter is of consequence. In other cases the temporary tablet remains in use through a period of mourning lasting from three months to three years and only at the expiration of that time is the permanent tablet enshrined. In those sections of China where interment is postponed until the mourning is ended the tablet is of course not installed till after burial. But in any event, before the tablet reaches its final resting place, one important ceremony usually takes place. This rite is known as “dotting the tablet” or “dotting the *chu*.”

The front inner surface bears the characters *shén chu*, which mean “lodging place of the spirit.” The front outer surface bears the characters *shén wei*, which mean “seat of the spirit.” In writing the inscriptions, a certain point or dot on the character for *chu* and a dot on the character for *wei* are omitted. Completing these two characters by adding to them the missing points constitutes the ceremony by which the tablet is consecrated. In the presence of a family gathering and with elaborate formality a mandarin of high rank takes a vermilion pencil and imposes the missing red dots upon the characters. Sometimes two ceremonies take place, with mandarins of different grades officiating, one for the completion of the *chu* and one for that of the

wei. By whatever means the consecration is accomplished, the tablet becomes thereby the permanent abode of the spirit.¹

With how much awe the sacred tablet is viewed we may learn from one notable recent example. The story of the journey of the late empress dowager's tablet, which took place in 1909, reflects on an enlarged scale the reverence universally accorded to these simple habitations of the spirits of the departed.

"The conveyance of Her Majesty's ancestral tablet from the tombs of the Eastern Hills to its resting-place in the Temple of Ancestors in the Forbidden City was a ceremony in the highest degree impressive and indicative of the vitality of those feelings which make ancestor worship the most important factor in the life of the Chinese. The tablet, a simple strip of carved and lacquered wood, bearing the name of the deceased in Manchu and Chinese characters, had been officially present at the burial. With the closing of the great door of the tomb the spirit of the departed ruler is supposed to be translated to the tablet, and to the latter is therefore given honour equal to that which was accorded to the sovereign during her lifetime. Borne aloft in a gorgeous chariot draped with Imperial yellow silk and attended by a large mounted escort,

¹ Vide "Records of the General Missionary Conference at Shanghai," Shanghai, 1890, pp. 647 ff.

J. Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 188 ff.

R. S. Gundry, "China Present and Past," London, 1895, pp. 265 ff. *Chinese Repository*, Vol. XVIII, p. 377.

Nitschkowsky, *op. cit.*, p. 366 f.

L. Wieger, "Moral Tenets and Customs in China" (transl.), Hokienfu, 1913, p. 561 f.

Tzu Hsi's tablet journeyed slowly and solemnly, in three days' stages, from the Eastern Hills to Peking. At each stage it rested for the night in a specially constructed pavilion, being 'invited' by the Master of the Ceremonies, on his knees and with all solemnity, to be pleased to leave its chariot and rest. For the passage of this habitation of the spirit of the mighty dead the Imperial road had been specially prepared and swept by an army of men; it had become a *via sacra* on which no profane feet might come or go. As the procession bearing the sacred tablet drew near to the gates of the capital, the Prince Regent and all the high officers of the Court knelt reverently to receive it. All traffic was stopped; every sound stilled in the streets, where the people knelt to do homage to the memory of the Old Buddha. Slowly and solemnly the chariot was borne through the main gate of the Forbidden City to the Temple of the Dynasty's ancestors, the most sacred spot in the Empire, where it was 'invited' to take its appointed place among the nine Ancestors and their thirty-five Imperial Consorts."¹

The fact that the soul resides in the tablet does not, of course, involve the belief that it is confined to the tablet. A common belief in China to-day is that each man has three souls. At death one remains with the body in the grave; one takes up its residence in the tablet; and one goes to the other world, usually to some purgatory.² This doctrine is often stated by Western

¹ Bland and Backhouse, "China Under the Empress Dowager," Philadelphia, 1912, pp. 473 ff.

² J. D. Ball, "The Celestial and His Religions," Hongkong, 1906, p. 80.

A. H. Smith, "The Uplift of China" (rev. ed.), Philadelphia, n. d., p. 97.

E. T. Williams, "China Yesterday and To-day," N. Y., 1923, p. 260.

authors as the *cause* of the rites which take place at the grave, the rites which take place before the tablet, and the Buddhist "masses" said for the departed. Historically, however, the doctrine arose to account for the fact that all these ceremonies were equally customary and yet logically contradictory. The distinction between a *yang* soul, which ascends on high, and a *yin* soul, which descends to the earth, has been familiar in China since classical times; the necessity for positing a third soul is the direct outcome of Buddhist beliefs and practices; and the effort to combine the three in a psychological doctrine is of Taoist origin.

The soul tablets are kept in small shrines or niches placed upon a high table, before which is set a lower table used for offerings. In the homes of poor families they often occupy the same table with the images of gods or are placed on a mere shelf in the corner of the living room. Among the more well-to-do a special room is set aside for the ancestral shrines. A rich family is likely to house its tablets in an ancestral temple or hall.¹ The kind of place in which the tablets rest, however, is a matter of convenience determined largely by financial circumstances. The tablets used by the immediate family are those of the deceased father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. The tablets of ancestors beyond the third generation (or sometimes beyond the fifth

¹ S. W. Williams, "The Middle Kingdom," N. Y., 1883, Vol. II, p. 250.

J. J. M. de Groot, "Religion of the Chinese," N. Y., 1910, pp. 78 ff.

generation) are burned in some parts of the country; in others they are removed to an ancestral temple representing a larger family group.¹

In addition to the family shrine or hall, there are the clan temples or ancestral halls of the clan. Here are preserved the spirit tablets of the founders of clans and their descendants for three generations. These temples serve as a common sanctuary for all members of the clan, and are maintained by endowments of land or capital in which all the families of the clan have shares. Found chiefly in villages (where the clan system most readily persists), they serve the clan as a sort of combined church, school, theater, and council room. The branches of clans, which are simply small groups of families within a large clan, maintain branch ancestral temples where the tablets of their common ancestors are enshrined.²

In the family rites the sacrificer is the head of the household—that is, the senior member of the family or eldest son of the deceased father. It is in his home, therefore, that the tablets are enshrined. In the rites of the clan the senior member of the clan officiates.³

¹ Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

J. C. Gibson, "Mission Problems in South China," Edinburgh, 1901, p. 83.

² Soothill, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

Soothill, "A Typical Mission in China," N. Y., 1906, p. 243.

Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 225 ff.

W. A. P. Martin, "The Lore of Cathay," N. Y., 1901, p. 272.

Leong and Tao, "Village and Town Life in China," London, 1915, pp. 22 ff.

³ Grube, *op. cit.*, pp. 44 ff.

Soothill, "Three Religions of China," p. 216.

Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 221 f.

The number of ancestors to whom offerings are presented varies with the occasion, the locality, and the family. Normally male and female ancestors to the third generation receive tendance; sometimes to the fourth and fifth generations. Deceased children have no spirit tablets or offerings.¹ The clan founder and his three immediate descendants usually receive the clan sacrifices.

The forms of Chinese ancestor worship are simple, for the rites constitute a family meal in which the dead share. Food and drink are placed on the table before the tablets of the deceased, and at a later hour, or on the following day, after the spirits have enjoyed the soul or essence of the offerings, all the members of the family (or clan) eat and drink what remains.² The presentation of the offerings is accompanied by an invitation to the departed to partake and by the prostrations which, for the Chinese, constitute the natural method of expressing reverence for parents or superiors. Candles and incense are usually burned as symbolical of invitation and to attract the attention of the spirits. When the sacrifice is presented on some special occasion, announcement is made at the same time of whatever event has prompted the ceremony. The nearest approach to prayer appears to be made on the most important occasions

¹ Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 190, 222.

Soothill, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

Johnston, *op. cit.*, pp. 251, 277.

² At the clan sacrifices only men are present.

when the ancestors are greeted with praise and requested to receive the offerings and to bestow their blessing.¹

The customary times for ancestral offerings are difficult to detail with accuracy, for they vary not only with the locality but also with the piety and the means of the family. In pious families incense and candles are burned before the tablets every morning and evening and on the first and fifteenth of every month (i. e., the new and full moons). These daily and fortnightly rites do not include a family meal and may be performed even by a servant or the keeper of an ancestral temple.² More formal sacrifices, with oblations of food and a family feast, are offered on the anniversaries of the birth and of the death of the deceased. On the latter occasion inquiry is sometimes made concerning the health of the departed and the answer obtained by divination.³ Similar sacrifices regularly occur at the New Year festival (sometimes on three different days of the first month); in the middle

¹ Schultze, *op. cit.*, p. 84 f.

J. Macgowan, "Lights and Shadows of Chinese Life," Shanghai, 1909, pp. 75 ff.

Soothill, "Three Religions," p. 216.

H. C. DuBose, "The Dragon, Image, and Demon," N. Y., 1887, p. 84 f.

² Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 223.

Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 266 f.

Williams, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 237.

J. H. Gray, "China," London, 1878, Vol. I, p. 84.

Chinese Repository, Vol. XVIII, p. 380.

China Review, Vol. IV, No. 5, p. 298.

E. T. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

³ Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 190, 224.

H. C. Sirr, "China and the Chinese," London, 1849, Vol. II, pp. 180 ff.

Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

China Review, Vol. IV, No. 5, p. 298.

of the seventh month; and at the winter solstice in the eleventh month.¹ The spring sacrifice in the second month and the autumn sacrifice in the eighth month are the great festivals for worship in the ancestral temples of the clan or of other units larger than the ordinary family.² At times offerings are also presented on the fifth day of the fifth month (the Dragon Boat Festival) and used to be customary on the last day of the old year.³

But the number of times for the tendance of ancestors is largely increased when to the annual celebrations we add the numerous occasions which necessitate formal "announcements" to the ancestors. These announcements, accompanied by offerings and prostrations, occur on the occasion of every event important in the life of the family, and are prompted by the feeling (when not merely regulated by custom) that in the pleasure or pain of such occurrences the ancestors must share. Chief among these family events are births and birthdays, betrothals, marriages, advancements in official rank, and deaths.⁴ In the royal family announcements were made

¹ Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 224, 228 f.

Schultze, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

W. N. Bitton, *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. XLI, p. 276.

² Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 228 f.

Macgowan, *op. cit.*, pp. 75 ff.

³ Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 224.

Schultze, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

"Records of Shanghai Conf.," 1890, p. 649.

DuBose, *op. cit.*, p. 84 f.

Doré, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 61.

⁴ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 272 f.

Grube, *op. cit.*, pp. 44 ff.

Schultze, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

not only at these familiar times but also upon the adoption of an heir to the throne and in every case of regular succession.¹ Even so modern a radical as Sun Yat-sen announced to the first Ming emperor, before his tomb at Nanking, the overthrow of the Manchus and the establishment of the Republic — a dramatic act revealing not the private convictions of Sun but his conception of what the people would expect and approve.²

Among the occasions for announcements, that of marriage is perhaps most significant. Indeed, it is hardly proper to refer to the ceremonial as an "announcement" in the same sense in which a birth or death is announced, for the joint worship of ancestors by bride and groom is the critical point of the marriage rite and actually determines its validity for purposes of legal decisions.³ Both on the day of marriage and on the second or third day thereafter the bridal pair present incense and drink-offerings and prostrate themselves before the ancestral tablets of the groom.⁴

In addition to all these ceremonies at the family shrine or in the ancestral hall there are annual rites performed at the tombs of ancestors. In earlier times such sacrifices were rare, but to-day they are an established practice. One such period for sacrifice occurs in the

¹ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

² W. N. Bitton, "The Regeneration of New China," London, 1914, p. 4.

³ E. T. C. Werner, "China of the Chinese," London, 1919, p. 49 f.

J. D. Ball, "Things Chinese," N. Y., 1904, p. 426.

⁴ Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 86 ff.

Schultze, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

Gray, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 192 ff.

third month; another, less universally observed, falls in the ninth month. The former, known as the Ts'ing Ming Festival, begins one hundred and six days after the winter solstice, and generally extends from about April 6 to April 20. To celebrate this springtide feast all the members of the family (the women folk usually excepted) gather at the ancestral tombs. After repairing and sweeping the graves and sacrificing to the spirit of the ground (the *genius loci*) they set forth a banquet of duck, geese, fish, fowl, and pig, present libations of wine, and burn incense, paper clothes, and paper money. Those who cannot afford such elaborate fare sometimes offer paper substitutes or even hire expensive food. The ancestral spirits are approached with reverential prostrations and invited to partake of the feast. The food and drink are then consumed by the assembled relatives or taken home to furnish a family banquet. The whole occasion is a kind of picnic, a cheerful family reunion which all the relative, even though they must journey far, are eager to attend. The members of the clan, in similar fashion, take a holiday to visit the tombs of the clan ancestors, there to celebrate a still larger reunion.¹ ✓

At the time of these rites at the tomb the spokesman of the family sometimes presents to the ancestors addresses which more nearly resemble prayers than do the customary salutations before the spirit tablets. Besides

¹ Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 44 ff.

Gray, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 320 ff.

Holcombe, *op. cit.*, p. 125 f.

L. Hodous, *Journal of N. China Branch R. A. S.*, Vol. XLVI, pp. 58 ff.

M. T. Yates, "Ancestral Worship," Shanghai, 1878, p. 29 f.

E. T. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 285 ff.

the invitations to the deceased and the announcement of family news, occur petitions such as these: "Looking up I pray for your penetrating glance and implore unlimited blessings upon us, that all our plans for wealth may be abundantly gratified." "Come and bless your posterity with prosperity and keep up the family forever," etc.¹ It is to be remembered, however, in quoting these lines, that the flattering words addressed to ancestors are often the same as those addressed to living guests, that the scholars who frame these poetical petitions usually copy the classics, and that the utterance of their compositions is seldom intelligible to the majority of the assembled group.

The Tsing Ming Festival likewise affords an opportunity for sacrifices before the ancestral tablets and for one of the annual offerings to beggar spirits.²

Outside the regular sphere of ancestor worship, but closely related to it in meaning, are the Chinese belief in "beggar spirits" and the customs to which it gives rise. True "beggar spirits," according to native Chinese thought, are those who, for one reason or another, are left without the benefit of the rites of tendance. They include those who died leaving no descendants or relatives, those whose descendants habitually neglect the proper offerings, and those whose bodies, perhaps because of death at sea or abroad, have never been recovered for proper burial. To these familiar types of "beggar spirits"

¹ *Chinese Repository*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 377 ff.

J. Jackson, in China Centenary Missionary Conference Records, N. Y., n. d., p. 231.

² Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Doolittle, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 44 ff.

Buddhist thought has added the souls of those who died in war or committed suicide. Whatever the cause of their misfortune, these spirits are wandering ghosts who run amuck outside of the natural and moral order of the universe. Subject to no law, they are a source of danger not only to their descendants but to all men. Provision is therefore made in various ways to placate them and thus to limit their malignant activity. Since these ghosts are a public menace, the ceremony of attending to their wants is of a public character and the expense of providing for them a public charge. At least twice a year—and always during the last half of the seventh month—special festivals are held at which banquets are spread for the wandering spirits and large quantities of paper money burned for their benefit. The rites include street processions with lanterns and torches and services conducted by Buddhist and Taoist priests. These ceremonies are thus as different as possible from the ancestral rites, and trace their origin to comparatively recent Buddhist sources. A more seemly and classical method of providing for beggar spirits is afforded in some districts by the practice of maintaining temples in which are housed the tables of those whose families are extinct. Offerings are then presented in spring and autumn by a paid attendant.¹

¹ Macgowan, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Courey, "L'Empire du Milieu," Paris, 1867, p. 271.

M. T. Yates, *op. cit.*, pp. 39 ff.

R. S. Gundry, *op. cit.*, p. 270 f.

J. F. Davis, "China," London, 1857, Vol. 1, p. 354.

E. T. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

CHAPTER III

THE MEANING OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

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Both for the student of religion and for the Christian missionary the most important factor in ancestor worship is its meaning. The question of its significance has been debated for centuries, and the expression of conflicting opinion still continues. The key to its meaning is to be found not in any summary of its outward forms but in a sympathetic examination of the *motives* which lie behind them. What ancestor worship means is not necessarily what it seems to the outsider to mean; it is what it means to those who practise it.

In attempting an analysis of these motives it is of prime importance to remember that they are numerous and varied. They cannot be summed up in a sentence nor dismissed in a phrase, for they vary not only with classes but with individuals. Indeed, they even vary *within* individuals. We shall therefore be nearer the truth in emphasizing complexity and in confessing uncertainty than in trying to achieve a logical but misleading simplicity.

The average Chinese performs the ceremonies of ancestor worship without any clearly conscious motive. He sacrifices because it is the custom to sacrifice. He does it because he has always done it and because everybody has always done it as far back as memory and tradition can reach. For that very reason it is not

necessary or natural for him to ask any questions or to offer any explanations. But if he is called upon to explain or if he is acutely observed, certain underlying ideas and sentiments are revealed.

To begin with the meaning and motives concerning which there is least dispute, we may note first the popular belief that the dead depend upon the living for sustenance and care.

Not only is abundant evidence available for similar beliefs among other animistic peoples, but to the prevalence of the belief among the Chinese there is almost universal testimony from the most experienced students of Chinese life and thought. The dead are commonly regarded as actually present at the sacrifices; they enjoy the offerings, and are dependent upon posterity for their continued well-being. Though this belief is seldom definitely expressed, and though it may not often take the form even of conscious feeling, it is an instinctive pre-supposition of the rites of tendance. We may therefore assume that one motive of ancestor worship is the desire to supply the needs of ancestors. It is prompted by an urgent sense of filial duty; it is a form of filial piety expressing itself in continued affection and solicitude for the departed. To regard the ancestral rites as the continuation of the homage and reverence shown to parents on earth, as the extension of filial piety beyond the grave, is characteristic not only of the classics but also of the best Chinese thought of to-day. The very fact that a man worships only his own ancestors and that

no tablets or rites of tendance are given to those who die before reaching marriageable age serves to show that only those to whom filial duty is owed may properly receive the sacrifices. How strongly this motive operates is conceded even by writers who do not share the Chinese view that ancestor worship is essentially a form of filial piety.

But for the Chinese to see in filial piety the essential meaning of ancestor worship does not necessarily involve a conscious belief in the necessity of offerings to supply the actual wants of the deceased. Filial piety, that is, remains a central motive not only on the more primitive level, where sacrifices may be realistically interpreted, but also at a higher intellectual stage where their significance has become symbolical or conventional. In other words, the efficacy of the offerings and the reality of the need may even be denied, yet the rites may be sedulously maintained as expressing the sense of family unity and continuity; for ancestor worship signifies that family ties are not broken by death. The deceased as well as the living are all parts of one family, all links in an endless family chain. Hence there is a sense of perpetual communion with the ancestral spirits, a feeling of their nearness and their continued interest in the affairs of their descendants. It is because the departed must share all the experiences of their posterity that the practice of "announcements" prevails. On these numerous occasions the offering is only incidental to the communication and the main motive is to maintain respectful contact with

the venerable deceased. Furthermore, even when the presence of the dead is doubted or denied, the ancestral rites may still be regarded as an expression of filial piety. At this stage, however, their significance is merely memorial. They serve as ceremonies by which the living may honor the memory of the dead and express their respect and gratitude for what the past has handed down to the present.

Filial piety, therefore, may be counted with certainty as a potent factor among the varied motives and meanings of ancestor worship. Indeed, it might better be described as a central strand into which are woven most of these same motives and meanings; for it is the fundamental feeling of duty owed to the departed which prompts the sacrifices of the sophisticated as well as the naïve, of the intellectual as well as the "superstitious." Whether the dead are regarded as hungry and needing food, as present and requiring respectful attention, or as figures of the past living in the memory alone, their claim upon the living is insistent; and the first duty and desire of a son is to honor that claim with unremitting devotion.

But the demands of the dead upon the living and the duty or privilege of meeting those demands constitute but one aspect of Chinese ancestor worship. The other aspect represents the needs and desires of the living. What a man can do for his ancestors is balanced by what his ancestors can do for him. At this point, however, we enter the arena of controversy. The sentiment of filial piety and the duties which it prompts are

universally acknowledged as vital elements; but the powers of deceased forebears and the extent to which descendants try to draw upon those powers furnish a perennial subject for conflict and debate.

To judge from the evidence supplied by nearly all missionary writers and from the opinions of most European and American authorities, the Chinese believe that ancestors exercise a providential care over their descendants. Their spirits are powerful to work good or ill, in accordance with the treatment which they receive. The main motive for sacrifices, therefore, is to obtain protection and prosperity, to secure temporal goods, and to avert the calamities which ensue upon neglect. With varying degrees of emphasis these conclusions are definitely stated by such experienced students of Chinese life as Gray, Smith, Williams, DeGroot, Grube, Giles, Ball, Johnston, Pott, Soothill, and dozens of others. And their assertions appear to be about equally positive, whether they speak as Christian missionaries or merely as agnostic observers. In opposition to this volume of material published by the great majority there should be noted a kind of minority report which embodies the views of the intellectual and classically educated Chinese and of certain foreigners who are in sympathy with their thought. To these expositors the classics (especially the "Li Ki") remain the standard by reference to which the ancestral rites should be interpreted. The test is not what the foreigner may conclude after observing the illiterate masses, but what the Chinese scholar believes after absorbing the classics.

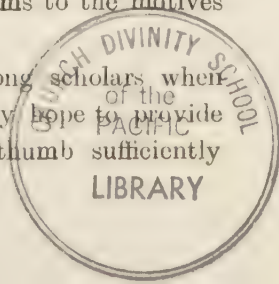
To him it seems a perversion of the true meaning of ancestor worship to regard the ancestors as gods who must be propitiated to secure blessings and to avert disasters. For him ancestors have no powers or privileges greater than those they possessed when alive. If they can bless or punish as they did in their lifetime it can only be in strict accordance with the moral law of the universe. No "worship" will extract from them undeserved prosperity or ward off merited disaster. It is quite true, of course, that trouble is supposed, in the long run, to visit those who neglect the tendance of their ancestors, just as similar evils will overtake those who neglect their living parents. But such punishment is a natural consequence of the Moral Law, or Tao, and does not represent the individual activity of indignant spirits. And the same principle applies to such rewards as prosperity and success.

Having in mind this brief review of the varied factors involved in ancestor worship, we are the better prepared to approach the central problem—the question whether ancestor worship is really "worship" in the strict sense, whether it properly constitutes a *religion*. Without much effort to define "worship" or to make clear the sense in which "religion" is used, most of the authorities on China who deal with the subject pronounce the verdict that ancestor worship is worship in the full sense of the word and that it can only be regarded as a form of religion. Many of the writers, as we have seen, make this assertion in substance by emphasizing the hope of

reward and the fear of punishment. Others specifically state that ancestor worship is "idolatry."

This conclusion is sometimes reached by the simple process of begging the question. Ancestor worship means the worship of ancestors and therefore ancestors are worshiped. But the question cannot be settled by reference to an English term. It cannot even be settled by reference to the Chinese term for "worship"—*pai*. The word *pai* is used to mean not only "worship" in the fullest sense, but also "visit," "pay respect to," "reverence," "make obeisance to," etc. Since these meanings shade into each other, the word itself offers no foothold for a decision. Nor are we much more safely guided when we observe the outward forms of the ancestral rites. These, as we have seen, include genuflections and prostrations, invocations and offerings. None of these acts necessarily involves strictly religious worship, for in China prostrations are often performed before parents or officials, the invocations used do not necessarily imply divine attributes, and the offerings presented can easily be interpreted as a family feast in which the spirits share. It is plain, therefore, that if we are to assess the religious value and meaning of ancestor worship we must define "worship" and "religion" and we must go behind the words and forms to the motives and desires which they express.

Since there is no agreement among scholars when they try to define religion, we can only hope to provide a rough and ready test or rule of thumb sufficiently



accurate for our purposes and likely to satisfy a majority of students. We may say that religion at the animistic level of the Chinese involves the belief in spirits beyond human control with whom men seek to establish favorable relations in order to avert harm and to obtain goods which they desire. Worship, at this same level, is simply the method of approach to spirits for the purpose of obtaining goods. If the approximate truth of this description is conceded, the way to judge the ancestral rites is plain. In so far as they are performed with the purpose of averting evil and obtaining goods by means of appeal to the powers of ancestors, they are worship in the strict sense and constitute a true cult. In so far as this motive is diluted or excluded by other motives, they are but partly religious or not religious at all. The test, then, is whether or not some return is expected for sacrifices offered. Is there a *quid pro quo*?

The answer to this question depends on the value assigned to the mass of evidence in support of the conclusion that the Chinese perform the ceremonies of ancestor worship with the aim to avoid calamities and to secure worldly prosperity. *That evidence is ample enough to establish the fact that in popular ancestor worship the element of religion is so strong as to justify the term "worship."* But the other elements in ancestor worship are so clearly and so vitally essential that we cannot equate ancestor worship and the worship of nature spirits and gods with the flat assertion that the ancestors are simply gods. For it is a safe general principle that

when two phenomena are very much alike yet differ in certain respects, the points of difference are always worthy of emphasis and often furnish the key to interpretation. Even when we call ancestor worship a religion, the fact remains that its distinctive characteristic is the element of filial piety, an element lacking in every other form of religion. The presence and power of this factor serve to complicate the meaning of ancestor worship and to set it in a class by itself.

No conclusion can therefore be sound which does not take into account the diversity of meaning and the shading of varied motives. At one extreme we have the rites performed as a conventional memorial with no belief implied in the powers or even the existence of the deceased. At the other extreme we have the same rites performed with motive and desires scarcely distinguishable from those which express themselves in the service of gods and spirits. Toward the latter extreme tend the beliefs of the unlettered masses, toward the former the beliefs of the Chinese classics and of all those who think and feel in harmony with the classics. Between the two extremes and in obedience to one tendency or the other are innumerable gradations and variations of motive and meaning. Here the emphasis will be upon duty and the motive disinterested; there the purposes will be chiefly the fruit of selfish desire or fear. In the most formal memorials there will be lurking an element of religion, and in the frankest effort to propitiate superior powers the element of filial duty will not be wholly absent. The one uniform factor will be the inevitable demand for

conformity. Whatever his other motives may be, every Chinese performs the ancestral rites because it is considered the proper thing to do.

In spite of the variety of opinion concerning the meaning of ancestor worship, there is general agreement as to its effect. As the religious product of the patriarchal system, it has served to reënforce all the characteristic elements of that system. By confirming parental authority and cultivating filial reverence and obedience it has strengthened the family bond and given stability to the family group. Similarly, on a large scale, it has cemented the clan group and perpetuated the clan system. It has thereby operated as a stabilizing force, working for the permanence of Chinese institutions and binding the whole nation together. Its effect upon the details of family life has been to promote the practice of adoption, to honor the position of the legal wife, to encourage early betrothal and polygamy, and in general to emphasize the superiority of the male.

As a stimulus to morality ancestor worship has been powerful. Conscious that they live and act in the sight of their ancestors, the Chinese instinctively refer to them as judges of their conduct. To the ordinary social motives they add the desire to live worthy of their forebears and the fear of committing acts that will dishonor them. But though these sanctions may serve to heighten the moral sense, their effect is the extreme of conservatism. Too unquestioning a reverence for the past amounts to little more than slavery to the past, so that any change appears disrespectful to the departed; and the dead thus rule the living.

CHAPTER IV

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND CHRISTIANITY

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The relation between ancestor worship and Christianity in China is not merely a question of theory. It has long been a practical issue of great moment among Christian missionaries. Indeed, the problem has bulked so large in the past that the events to which it gave rise stand out clearly in the pages of general history.

There have been four chief movements in the history of Christianity in China—the Nestorian, beginning in the seventh century; the Franciscan, a relatively brief episode chiefly of the early fourteenth century; the general Roman Catholic movement beginning with the Jesuits in the sixteenth century; and the Protestant movement, beginning in the early nineteenth century. Of these periods the records of the first two are very meager, and we have no reason to believe that in those early days the question of ancestor worship was raised in any acute form. Even in the third period more than fifty years elapsed after the arrival of the first Jesuits before the problem reached the stage of controversy. The two periods, therefore, into which the history of the relations between Christianity and Chinese ancestor worship naturally divides itself are the Roman Catholic period, from about 1635 to 1742, and the Protestant period, beginning in 1807.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CONTROVERSY¹

It takes two to make a quarrel; and as long as the Jesuits were the only Catholic missionaries in China, no agitation about ancestor worship arose. Matteo Ricci, the first noted Jesuit leader, had viewed the ancestral rites as merely civil and secular in their nature, and had tolerated the practice of them by Christian converts. He had written,

"They do not recognize in the dead any divinity, they do not ask anything of them: that is why there is absolutely no trace of idolatry in it."

Justified by these views, a general tolerance was observed. But the tolerance was never complete, for such "superstitious" additions to the strictly Confucian ceremonies as had been introduced by Taoism and Buddhism were forbidden to converts; and even the legitimate rites were permitted only when converts could not avoid them without getting into trouble. Furthermore, all these concessions were regarded as only temporary and as destined to be gradually abandoned with the growth in power and influence of the Christian church.

But the equilibrium of this Jesuit compromise was soon upset when, after 1631, members of the Dominican

¹ The following account is chiefly based upon the article *Chinois (Rites)* by J. Brucker in the "Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique," Paris, 1905 (Vol. II). This article is the most detailed and the most recent available, prepared with great care by an expert and supported by extensive references to the sources. The article concludes with an elaborate bibliography, to which the reader is referred.

and Franciscan orders began to join the group of Catholic missionaries. The Dominicans proved to have positive ideas on the subject of ancestor worship which led them to "view with alarm" the laxer practice of the Jesuits. The Dominican leader who first voiced this opposition was Jean-Baptiste Morales. The controversy between him and his followers on the one side and the Jesuit fathers on the other was confined for a time to private letters and statements. But at last it was brought to official notice when Morales visited Rome in 1643 and submitted to the Holy See a series of "questions or doubts" suggested by the varying answers to the question of ancestor worship among Christians.¹ These questions were answered on September 12, 1645, by a decree of the Congregation of the Propaganda to which Pope Innocent X gave his approval. The decree, which was not concerned with the truth of the facts set forth by Morales, simply condemned and prohibited the rites *as he described them*. Since everything, however, depended on how the rites were described, the Jesuits in China were not disposed to acquiesce, and sent Father Martini to Rome to represent the ancestral rites as acts of filial respect and gratitude without religious significance. On the basis of this description a decree was issued in 1656, approved

¹In all stages of this controversy the question of ancestor worship was presented and argued in company with the kindred question of the "worship" of Confucius, and often in company with the question as to the proper Chinese term for "God." For our purposes the question of ancestor worship is detached and treated by itself.

by Pope Alexander VII, which (though cautiously worded, with an eye to the previous decree) sanctioned the practice of the ancestral rites, except for the "superstitious" features to which we have just referred. Though this official response naturally gave satisfaction to the Jesuits, the Dominicans could not accept it as nullifying the response of 1645, and they therefore put to the Holy See the question whether such nullification was intended. The answer, set forth in 1669 by Pope Clement IX, declared that both decrees remained in force and both must be observed according to circumstances! The practical result was to leave to the conscience of missionaries the decision as to whether, in any given case, the circumstances were those considered in the reply of 1645 or those considered in the reply of 1656. Under these highly adjustable conditions a temporary harmony prevailed. Indeed, it was twenty-four years before another event of importance occurred.

On March 26, 1693, Charles Maigrot, the Vicar Apostolic of Fukien, published a charge to all the missionaries in his vicariate, forbidding the permission to Christians under any circumstances of participation in the *solemn* sacrifices or offerings in honor of the dead. Ancestral tablets were to be authorized only if the usual inscriptions were changed and a profession of Christian faith inscribed therewith. Maigrot even declared that the statement of Pope Alexander VII, though wisely suited to the circumstances with which it dealt, was not true to the facts on certain points. With the purpose of

obliging the pope to examine once more the facts so diversely interpreted, Maigrot addressed a statement to the Holy See asking permission to present his case, and in the following year dispatched Charmot to be his representative at Rome.

Before a decision was reached ten years elapsed, years devoted to an endless amount of discussion *pro* and *con* before various committees and commissions meeting at Rome. In this complex process many members of the Jesuit, Dominican, and Franciscan orders played their parts, each group calling to its aid all the expert testimony it could command. Charmot secured from the Sorbonne a judgment unfavorable to the rites. But the Jesuits played what was thought to be the trump card. They succeeded in securing from the Chinese emperor K'ang-hsi, who had long been a kindly patron of the Jesuits, an official public statement approving the interpretation of the ancestral rites as purely civil and non-religious. Meantime, however, Pope Innocent XII had died (September, 1700), and the new pope, Clement XI, inherited the great mass of conflicting testimony in which the original question had now become embedded. He evidently did not consider the opinion of the emperor decisive, and he was perhaps unappreciative of the distinction made by the Jesuits in their claim that they had asked *testimony* from the emperor but a *decision* from the pope. His final decision, not rendered till November, 1794, may be summarized as follows: Christians must not be permitted to perform the customary offerings

or rites, whether "solemn" or "less solemn" (*as these had been reported to the pope in the questions submitted*), either before the ancestral tablets or at the tombs, even if they profess that the rites are non-religious. But the passive presence of Christians at such ceremonies may be permitted if their absence would incur hate or enmity and if they are willing to make a profession of their faith. The decision was complicated by the further addition that Christians should not be forbidden to perform such other rites for the dead as had no appearance of being "superstitious" and could properly be classed as civil and non-religious. The power to decide what was forbidden and what was permitted was to lie in the hands of the "Patriarch of Antioch" (the title of the commissioner whom the pope was dispatching to China) and of the local bishops and vicars apostolic.

Despite certain obvious efforts at compromise, the judgment, so clearly adverse to the Jesuits, was likely to cause a revolution in the Catholic Church in China. Perhaps for this reason, publication of the decree itself was withheld for some years. But the publication of its substance and the enforcement of its provisions were intrusted to a papal representative, de Tournon, who had been consecrated "Patriarch of Antioch" before leaving Rome in 1703 and who reached Peking at the close of the year 1705. When the emperor learned that one object of his mission was to suppress the practice of the ancestral rites by Chinese Christians his cordiality

gave way to indignation, and Tournon thought fit to retire to Nanking. Thereupon the emperor decreed that all the missionaries, upon pain of expulsion, must obtain from him a certificate which would grant permission to preach the gospel only to those who promised not to oppose the rites. Tournon then decided to "release" the facts concerning the pope's decision, and in harmony with that decision he issued a decree commanding all missionaries, upon pain of excommunication, to forbid Christians to practice the ancestral rites or to use ancestral tablets. The Catholic missionaries thus found themselves between the devil and the deep sea. Apparently they had to choose between expulsion or excommunication. Under the circumstances, most of them preferred to avoid expulsion (and the ruin of their work) at the risk of excommunication. For the emperor was close at hand and his purpose definite, whereas the pope was far away and Tournon was their only authority for the purport of the unpublished papal decree. Many of the Jesuits and not a few from the other orders demanded and received the emperor's certificates; large numbers probably ignored both decrees, reasonably trusting to lax enforcement; but some well-known missionaries were expelled from China. Tournon himself was imprisoned at Macao.

With the plea that the papal legate had misrepresented the pope, the Jesuits, encouraged by the emperor, sent envoys to Rome. Maigrot, now expelled, returned to Europe with his story; and long letters were dispatched

from Tournon giving his own version of the controversy. By the end of 1708 all these forces had converged upon the pope and his cardinals, much to their distress and confusion. Their first effort was to placate the emperor without repudiating Tournon. To this end, the pope wrote a letter to K'ang-hsi, assuming responsibility for the actions of Tournon but promising to read the documents presented by the Jesuit delegation and to write again more in detail. Clement XI intended only to save the emperor's face; but K'ang-hsi fully expected the pope to change his mind. Meantime, however, he maintained his measures against missionaries who opposed the rites. The next move of the pope was to publish his last decree and to reënforce it with another (September, 1710) commanding its observance and rejecting all appeals against it. Finally, to save himself and the Congregation of the Propaganda from being completely submerged by the increasing flood of controversial literature, he forbade further publications on the subject, except by special permission, and declared the case fully expounded and definitely closed.

Some five years later, however, Clement XI felt it necessary to publish an apostolic constitution confirming in the most solemn and precise terms the previous decrees. The document repeats most of the pope's original decree of 1704. Participation by Christians in ancestral sacrifices is forbidden, even to those who protest that the acts are non-religious. The same concessions are added, allowing the passive presence of

Christians at such ceremonies, if their absence would incur hate or enmity and if they are willing to make a previous profession of their Christian faith. Christians, furthermore, are not allowed to keep in their houses the usual ancestral tablets unless these contain only the name of the deceased with an accompanying inscription of Christian faith regarding the dead. As in the earlier pronouncement, an exception is made of such other acts customarily performed as could in no possible manner have even the appearance of superstition. And again the decision as to what is so defined is left to the judgment of the visitor general and of the bishops and vicars apostolic. In conclusion, the pope prescribes the formula of an oath to be taken by all missionaries in China, according to which they pledge themselves in the most solemn terms to observe everything which the constitution prescribes for them. To this demand were attached the severest penalties, including excommunication.

At last, after eighty years of controversy, there had come from Rome a decision that not only was intended to be final but was accepted as final by all Catholic missionaries in China. Resistance collapsed. The missionaries took the oath and did what they could to change the deep-rooted habits of their converts. Partly for the very reason that the controversy had been so long in process of solution, the rites were firmly established as part of the practice of Christians, and only a minority among the lower classes were willing to renounce them.

Most of the Chinese Christians either refused to obey or gave their promises only to violate them. The powerful *literati* became increasingly embittered against the Christian propaganda, and, persecution began. The emperor himself, so long the patron of the Jesuit leaders, was now the bitter opponent of the Christian church. To be defied in his own realm by the orders of an inferior foreign potentate was an insufferable experience for one of the proudest and strongest of China's rulers. Within a year after the pope's pronouncement had reached China the emperor signed the decree of an imperial tribunal which ordained the expulsion of all Christian missionaries and the destruction of their churches. In consideration, it is true, of the great services rendered him by the Jesuits, he promised to relax the penalties for those who still held his certificates. But the damage had been done, and from then on the persecuted church dwindled in numbers and in influence. It maintained a fluctuating and uncertain life until its revival in the nineteenth century; but not for a hundred and fifty years were its numbers restored to what they had been in the best days of K'ang-hsi's reign.

But the story is not yet quite complete, for Jesuit opposition seemed to be endowed with nine lives. Partly because of the human reason that it was more than flesh and blood could bear to see the church disintegrating and thousands of converts slipping back into heathenism, partly because of the technical reason that even the stern constitution of 1715 left certain loopholes of escape,

the Catholic missionaries made one last effort to stem the tide of defeat.

Knowing the state of confusion and despair in China, Pope Clement XI dispatched another visitor general—Mezzabarba. He reached Canton in October, 1720. But when the emperor heard that the new legate was planning to ask his indorsement of the pope's constitution, he issued an order that all missionaries should embark with the legate for Europe! In great terror Mezzabarba explained that while he could not suspend the pope's decree, he was authorized to make certain concessions or interpretations, and that he would gladly transmit the emperor's views to the pope and bring back the latter's response. K'ang-hsi let him understand that if the reply was not satisfactory, things would be worse than before; and Mezzabarba left for Canton, where he embarked hastily and gratefully on May 23, 1721. From Macao he dispatched to the missionaries in China a pastoral letter in which he set forth the so-called "Eight Permissions." Premising that of course he could permit nothing forbidden by the pope in the constitution of 1715, he goes on to answer certain questions and doubts raised by that decision. These answers were really concessions, permitting all ceremonies concerned with the dead in which there were no traces of "superstition," permitting prostrations and offerings before the coffin where the tablet used was of the "corrected" type prescribed by the pope, permitting prostrations and the use of candles before the corrected tablet, etc. These

"Permissions" were to be used with caution and communicated to converts only in case of necessity.

The chief result of the "Permissions" was further dissension among the missionaries in China. Some bishops commanded their observance, others forbade them as in conflict with the pope's decisions. Equally lively disagreement sprang up in Rome after Mezzabarba's return. Clement XI had just died; but his successor ordered an elaborate investigation of the whole matter, which was not completed until the pontificate of Benedict XIV. Benedict then proceeded to write the last chapter of a controversy that had already been in process for over a century.

In his bull *Ex quo*, dated July 11, 1742, the pope summarized the controversy up to date, solemnly ratifying the constitution of 1715 and repudiating individually and collectively the "Eight Permissions" of Mezzabarba.¹ He cuts from under them their one ground of support by defining those "other things not superstitious" referred to by Clement XI as meaning usages *different from* those cited and condemned in 1715. Finally, he prescribes a new oath for missionaries in China, pledging obedience to the constitution of 1715 and repudiation of the "Permissions" of 1721.

The decree was so vigorous and so ruthlessly detailed that the papal decisions were at last securely

¹ There is good reason to believe that the "Permissions" were communicated to Mezzabarba by Clement XI on the understanding that he should use them in accordance with his own judgment, assuming the risk of subsequent papal approval or condemnation.

riveted upon the enfeebled church in China. The operation had been successful, but in the meantime the patient had nearly died. During the reign of K'ang-hsi's successor, the emperor Yung-cheng (1723-1735), the church suffered a severe persecution, during which three hundred churches were destroyed. When Ch'ien-lung became emperor in 1736, persecution increased in bitterness and continued at intervals for many years. The publication in China of Benedict's decree was met with apathetic despair. It provided the finishing touch to a generation of disasters. A missionary in Peking, writing to his brother in Vienna (October, 1743), says :

"You will doubtless ask what impression has been made here by the new constitution of Pope Benedict XIV. . . . I reply . . . we have received it and we have sworn to observe it. As a matter of fact, there are no longer so many difficulties, this body of Christians in China being almost reduced to the poor people who find difficulty in feeding and housing themselves and are very far from being in a condition to make offerings and sacrifices to their deceased ancestors or to erect temples to them."

As we look back upon the history of this famous controversy, we can see behind the details, the theoretical outline which gave it meaning. All were agreed that the Christian Chinese must be forbidden to practice observances *recognized* as idolatrous or "superstitious." On that point there was no argument.¹ The discussion

¹All Buddhist and Taoist accretions, for instance, connected with funeral rites or with ancestor worship, were uniformly condemned.

turned entirely on the question as to whether the regular classical ancestral rites were of a religious nature. How far was "ancestor worship" genuine worship? That is, were supernatural powers attributed to the deceased, was true prayer addressed to them, and were rewards and punishments expected from them? Those who said "yes" opposed the rites as idolatrous. Those who said "no" permitted them as ceremonies of commemoration and respect. We have seen from our previous study how ample was the evidence on both sides; and when we remember how fully acquainted were the Jesuits with the Chinese classics and how extensive and intimate their acquaintance with the Confucian *literati*, we may well ascribe to them genuine convictions not incompatible with Christian sincerity. The problem they faced is still a problem.¹

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND PROTESTANTISM

We can hardly speak of the "Protestant Controversy" over ancestor worship in the sense in which we have spoken of the "Roman Catholic Controversy," because for over one hundred years Protestant missionary opinion and practice has been too nearly uniform to cause dissension in the ranks or to attract any attention outside of missionary circles.

¹ C. H. Robinson, writing in the twentieth century from the point of view of an Anglican scholar says, in his "History of Christian Missions" (p. 207), "There is no problem raised by missionary work in the Far East on which it is more difficult to formulate a definite policy and which at the same time presses so urgently for a solution."

The external history of the question during the modern period is easily told. Except for occasional references to ancestor worship in the published books and reports of missionaries, nearly all of which condemn the rites as "idolatrous," the problem was not brought before the missionary public until 1877, after seventy years of Protestant work. The reason for this is two-fold: the problem of ancestor worship had not been recognized as a problem, and Protestant missionaries, acknowledging no central authority, had never met as one body until 1877. In May of that year, however, there was held at Shanghai a conference¹ in which one of the subjects discussed was ancestor worship. The chief feature of this session was a long paper on ancestor worship by the Rev. M. T. Yates, later published in enlarged form, which condemned all the rites as "idolatrous" and expressed violent opposition to any form of concession on the part of the Christian church. In the accompanying discussion there appeared nothing that could fairly be called dissent. A few missionaries merely urged the need for sympathy in handling the question and for supplementing arbitrary rules by developing a more sensitive Christian conscience on the part of converts.

The next general conference of Protestant missionaries took place in Shanghai in May, 1890;² and again the subject of ancestor worship came up for discussion.

¹*Vide* Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, held at Shanghai, May 10-24, 1877, Shanghai, 1878.

²Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890, Shanghai, 1890.

The Rev. W. A. P. Martin, a learned sinologue and friend of the *literati*, read a paper entitled "The Worship of Ancestors—a Plea for Toleration," which emphasized the classical interpretation of the rites and minimized their religious significance. The other leading essay, by the Rev. H. Blodget, reiterated the more orthodox missionary views and asserted,

"Well will it be for Protestant missions if in the future, as in the past, no concessions are made to ancestral worship."

During the discussion which followed, however, several speakers of importance voiced their sympathy with Dr. Martin's interpretation and urged a greater degree of discrimination and tolerance in dealing with the ancestral rites. But the debate closed with an appeal from Hudson Taylor, of the China Inland Mission, who took the floor to say,

"I trust that all those who wish to raise an indignant protest against the conclusion of Dr. Martin's paper will signify it by rising."

And almost the whole audience rose. Despite this dramatic conclusion, the development of thought on the subject of ancestor worship since 1877 was clearly shown by the fact that several leaders were ready to object in public to the conventional view of the question and were able to secure at least a hearing.

Seventeen years later, in 1907, the great Centenary Missionary Conference was held at Shanghai.¹ By that

¹Vide China Centenary Missionary Conference Records, N. Y., n. d.

time there was far more general recognition of the problems created by ancestor worship and a far more open-minded approach to the subject.¹ Liberal views were freely expressed which would have been regarded at the earlier gatherings as due to the direct intervention of Satan. The vital importance of the subject was recognized not by excitement on the floor of the convention but rather by the care with which the case had been prepared. A committee of thirteen had been at work upon the material for several years; and its chairman, the Rev. James Jackson, presented a detailed and thoughtful paper on the nature, origin, and meaning of the ancestral rites which offered certain practical suggestions for dealing with them. The essay was conservative but discriminating, and its proposals were constructive. The ensuing debate culminated in the adoption of four resolutions which may justly be viewed as a summary of present-day Protestant opinion. They read as follows:

“I. That while the worship of ancestors is incompatible with an enlightened and spiritual conception of the Christian faith, and so cannot be tolerated as a practice in the Christian Church, yet we should be careful to encourage in our Christian converts the feeling of reverence for the memory of the departed which this custom seeks to express, and to impress upon the Chinese in general the fact that Christians attach great importance to filial piety.

¹*Vide Missionary Review of the World*, Dec., 1916, pp. 883 ff.

“II. That recognizing the full provision made in Christianity for the highest development and expression of filial piety, this Conference recommends that greater prominence be given in preaching, in teaching, and in religious observances, to the practical duty of reverence to parents, and thus make it evident to non-Christians that the Church regards filial piety as one of the highest of Christian duties.

“III. Recognizing that in replacing the worship of ancestors in China by Christianity, many delicate and difficult questions inevitably arise, we would emphasize the necessity for the continuous education of the conscience of the members of the Christian Church by whom all such questions must ultimately be adjusted, expressing our confidence that, through the leading and illumination of the Spirit of God, the Church will be guided into right lines of action.

“IV. That this Conference recommends our Chinese brethren to encourage an affectionate remembrance of the dead by beautifying graves and erecting useful memorials to parents and ancestors, by building or endowing churches, schools, hospitals, asylums and other charitable institutions as is common in all Christian lands, thus making memorials of the departed a means of helping the living through successive generations.”

There the Protestant case against ancestor worship rests, so far as united action is concerned. At the last great Protestant gathering, the National Christian Conference of May, 1922, the subject of ancestor worship was not even broached. Whatever future action may be taken is likely to represent the views of the Chinese

leaders of the Chinese church, rather than the opinions of Western missionaries. What form it will take, if any, only the future can reveal.

We have so far been concerned only with the external history of the relations between Protestantism and ancestor worship. We have dealt with events rather than with ideas. But the ideas which gave rise to these events and were expressed in them are of more importance for our purpose and will indicate more fully the present situation and the future possibilities.

The one point on which all observers of experience are agreed, the one point on which all missionaries are united, is the fact that ancestor worship is still one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of Christianity. Callous indifference may be harder to deal with, but ancestor worship offers the central point of *religious* conflict.¹ It is relatively easy to give up the worship of the various popular gods; but to give up the ancestral rites often means ostracism from the family and the clan.² It often brings down upon the Christian believer the scorn and hatred of his own kin and incurs the bitter taunt that the Christian has no ancestors.³ The refusal to practice ancestor worship is indeed the only excuse for intolerance and persecution on religious grounds.⁴

¹ DeGroot, "Religion of the Chinese," p. 84 f.

Moule, "New China and Old," p. 197.

Pitcher, "In and About Amoy," p. 73.

Soothill, "A Typical Mission in China," p. 244.

² Ball, "The Chinese at Home," p. 23.

³ Macgowan, "Lights and Shadows of Chinese Life," p. 71

⁴ Johnston, "China and Formosa," p. 53.

But it is not only the fear of social punishment which makes the break hard. Aside from all public opinion,

“the pleasant gentle, domestic associations of ancestor worship make the heart rebel at adopting a faith that destroys it.”¹

The intimate and tender significance of the rites and all the connotation with which memory and tradition enrich them cannot be suppressed or wiped out without pain. Yet evidence is cited that Christian Chinese are even more opposed to permitting the rites than are their Western patrons.² In weighing such testimony, however, it must be remembered that the average convert is too ill-educated to interpret the classical point of view and can speak only for himself. He is likely, too, to be dominated by the convictions of the missionary. When he thinks independently as a trained Chinese scholar, his view is usually broader and more discriminating.³

Confronted by the obstacle of ancestor worship and the perplexing problems which it raises, the missionaries of Protestant churches have expressed in their writings and speeches a fairly uniform attitude. With a few exceptions, they have defined “ancestor worship” as true worship and flatly condemned it as “idolatrous.” They have therefore forbidden to Christian converts the

¹ *Vide the Chinese Repository*, Vol. XVIII, p. 384.

² Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

Nitschkowsky, *op. cit.*, p. 390 f.

Bitton, “Regeneration of New China,” p. 133.

³ “Records of the Shanghai Conference,” 1890, p. 657.

F. C. M. Wei in the *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. XLII, pp. 409 ff.

use of ancestral tablets and the practice of all rites connected therewith. This orthodox position was clearly expressed in the three conferences and has been set forth in numerous works already cited. Though in recent years a more liberal attitude may be observed, the slight change of temper which it marks has created a more sympathetic atmosphere, in which the problem may be stated and discussed, without appreciably changing the uniformity of Protestant thought and practice.

The prime reason for this Protestant uniformity is of course the plain fact that ancestor worship, as we have seen, is a genuine religion in the lives of many millions and closely akin to religion in the lives of many others. The religious side of ancestor worship was too obvious to be ignored and too dangerous to be permitted. It is not surprising, therefore, that missionaries should have reached this conclusion. It is only surprising that, with few exceptions, they should never have seen the possibility of any other conclusion. That is, the point to be remarked is not their prompt decision on the question, but the fact that they so seldom view it as a real problem. Their inability to qualify, to interpret, and to discriminate was chiefly due to the sound and saving fact that they were apostles and not professors, that they had come to bury ancestor worship, not to praise it, and that their one thought was to exalt Christ. So far as their policy and attitude were due to the enthusiasm of their Christian faith, we shall do well to honor their convictions and to follow their example.

But there is more than one kind of Christian; and their opinions and methods were due not only to their devotion to the cause of Christ but in some measure to the fact that they were Protestants. They had a rooted and instinctive suspicion of any kind of ritual. Candles, incense, and genuflections were naturally abhorrent to them. They could think of them only as the outward forms of idolatry. Against all such forms they had the strongest kind of antecedent prejudice. And because most of them had never studied with interest or sympathy any religion except their own, and had indeed but little material for such study, they had an inelastic idea of the meaning of worship. If you bow down before something and burn incense, you are worshiping it as a god — no matter what "it" may be or what you may really mean by your actions. An act, they assumed, either is worship or it isn't: there can be no distinctions or gradations. They would have said that a Roman Catholic always worshiped the saints in the same sense that he worshiped God and they often said that a Chinese always worshiped his ancestors in the same sense as we worship God. Their instincts were fundamentally right and their conclusions essentially sound, because they were true Christians and true missionaries. But their inability to see any problem or to draw any distinctions was not due to their religious faith but to their inflexible Protestantism and to their more than excusable ignorance. These conclusions are clearly borne out by the fact that there was always a

more liberal minority composed of Christians quite as earnest as the orthodox majority and that the majority itself has become more liberal during the last generation—a change which we may attribute not to the fading of Christian convictions but to the waning of prejudices and the growth of a wider knowledge.

Christian missionaries or other Western observers who have dissented in any degree from the orthodox position of flat denunciation and complete prohibition of all the rites have expressed their views in two directions—by interpreting the meaning of ancestor worship in such a way as to admit other elements than pure worship, and by offering various practical proposals for adjusting the conflict between ancestor worship and Christianity. The ideas expressed in their interpretation of the rites have already been considered and quoted in the chapter on “The Meaning of Ancestor Worship.” Their constructive suggestions may now be noted as bearing directly on the question of the relations between ancestor worship and Christianity.

The remedies and policies proposed come from many sources. They are radical or mild according to the interpretation of the rites which appears reasonable to their authors. There is fortunately a conviction increasingly widespread that the attitude of the church towards ancestor worship should be not simply prohibitive but also constructive. If the church is to be true to the purpose and practice of its Head, it must seek not to destroy but to fulfill. Merely to leave a vacuum in place

of ancestor worship is not to solve the problem, for the last state of the Chinese might be worse than the first. Instead of being merely dogmatic and repressive, the church ought to make intelligent provision for satisfying whatever wholesome instincts find their expression in ancestor worship.¹ Among the worthy motives for the ancestral rites are filial piety, the longing to commemorate the departed, and the desire to maintain the family unity as the basis of society.² How predominant are these factors in ancestor worship we have already shown in our study of its meaning. Yet scant consideration has been given to provisions for perpetuating their value. Among the practical measures suggested for adoption by the church are the holding of memorial services in churches or at the graves, the recognition of an annual day or days for commemoration of ancestors, the adoption of photographs in place of the tablets or the keeping of family trees in Bibles instead of the inscriptions on tablets, the placing of Christian memorial tablets in churches, or the erection of charitable memorials. Some of these proposals are made with enthusiasm, some with a reluctance shown by the proviso that prostrations and even bows before the picture or the tomb shall be forbidden. Other constructive suggestions include the

¹ Martin, "Hanlin Papers" (second series), pp. 348 ff.

Gundry, "China, Present and Past," pp. 285 ff.

"Centenary Conference Records," pp. 239, 607, 620.

² The most helpful study yet published of these motives and their legitimate expression is that by the Rev. C. Y. Cheng, in the "Report of the Special Committee on the Chinese Church" published in the *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 364 ff.

demand that Christian teaching shall lay greater stress on the duties of filial piety and on the Christian meaning of the "Communion of Saints" as a spiritual unity in Christ which transfigures the sense of dependence on the departed into the sense of fellowship with the departed. Some even suggest encouraging prayers *for* the dead on the not unreasonable plea that the Chinese need not forever remain Protestant Puritans.¹ In general, the motive prompting these various proposals is to develop rites and practices which shall aim to satisfy Chinese desires without betraying Christian principles. The purpose has therefore been to suppress the idea of propitiation and dependence and to retain that of reverence for the memory of the departed.²

CONCLUSION

In concluding our survey of Chinese ancestor worship and its relation to Christianity, three points may be noted. One is concerned with the immediate, the others with the more distant future.

For the time being, the wisest policy for Western leaders of the Christian church in China is to continue the scientific and sympathetic study of ancestor worship

¹ For these and other proposals see

Wei, *op. cit.*, pp. 280 ff.

Warneck, *op. cit.*, pp. 354 ff.

Martin: "Lore of Cathay," p. 274 f.; "Hanlin Papers" (second series), pp. 348 ff.

Centenary Conference Reports, pp. 235 ff.; 604 ff.

C. Y. Cheng in the *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 364 ff.

² Moule, "New China and Old," pp. 218 ff.

as the most important religious phenomenon in the life of the people. Such study will enable the church, as past experience has already proved, to fulfill the pressing duty of making ever more adequate and intelligent provision for the Christian expression of those motives and desires which for thousands of years have found their fulfillment in the ancestral rites. In such a gradual process, wisely guided, the Chinese church will find enrichment and attain a growing capacity to win and hold the people of China.

But we have already entered upon an era in which this growth will depend more and more completely upon Chinese leadership. Western missionaries, in the long process of education and experiment, can still offer their aid and encouragement; but the problem will ultimately be solved by the Chinese themselves. Only those who have grown up within a system in which ancestor worship is central can wisely make provision for its future evolution and sublimation. Ancestor worship still awaits treatment at the hands of those who are both truly Chinese and truly Christian. In their hands we may safely leave its destiny.

The problem of its destiny will be made easier of solution not simply by a fuller understanding of the ancestral rites and a richer development of Christian faith. The greatest single factor working towards solution will be the extension of scientific knowledge and the spread of modern thought. Within strictly religious limits a permanent conflict is always possible. Ancestor

worship, against the background of tradition, is amazingly strong. But against the new background of science and liberal thought, now so rapidly taking shape, it is vulnerable at many points. Science will surely serve as the ally of Christ's religion in purifying the worship of ancestors of all fear and falsehood so that what it contains of living truth may abide as a treasured possession.

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